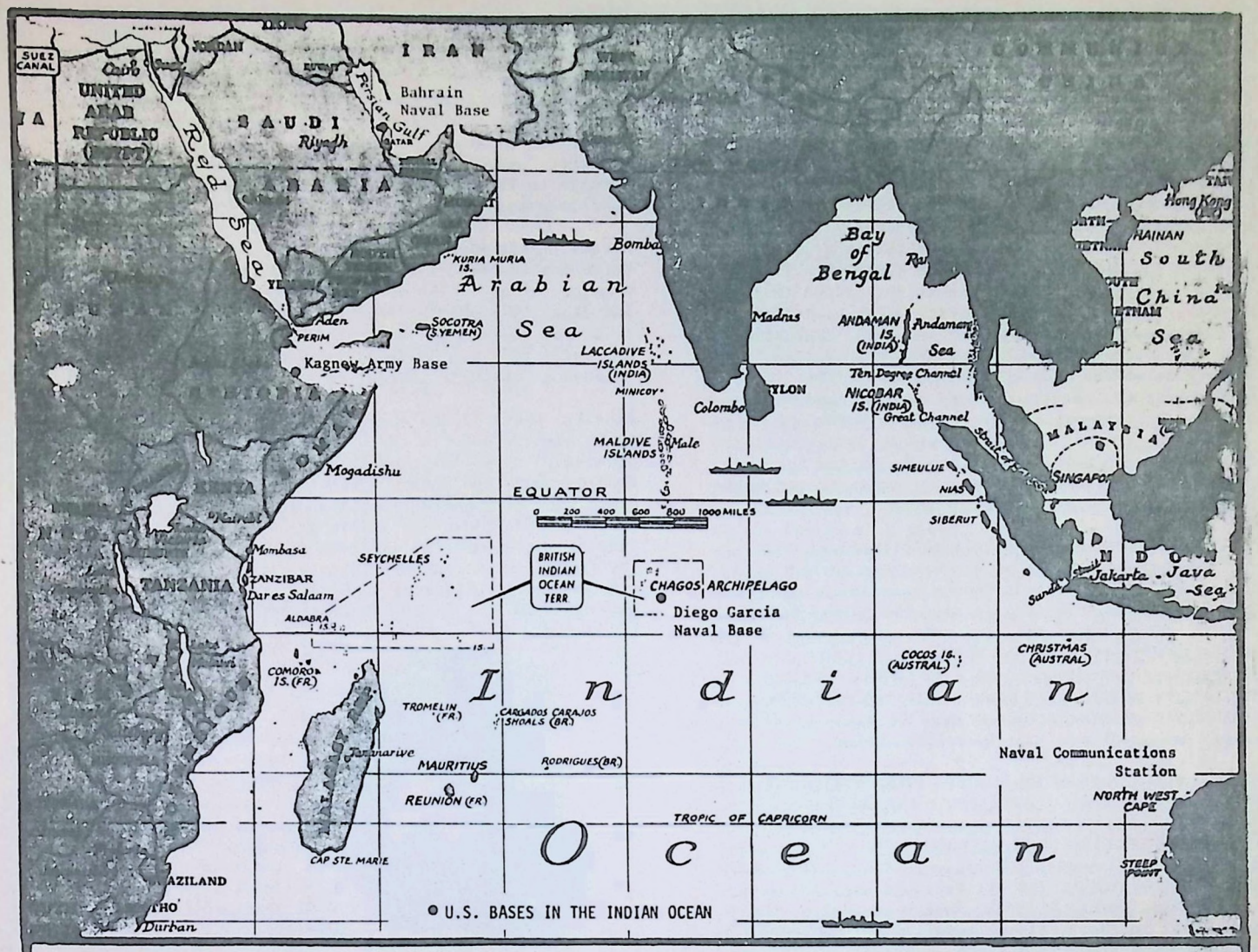

THE NEW IMPERIAL NAVY - east of suez

Most of what follows in this article is taken from the November 1972 issue of the North American Congress on Latin America entitled "The New Imperial Navy".

In recent years, the Pentagon has made clear its plans to expand the Navy into its principal and even primary instrument of global military strategy. And the U.S. government is increasingly relying on naval forces as an active instrument of intimidation. For the third straight year, the Pentagon allotted the Navy the biggest share of its monies--an estimated $26.4 billion, compared with $24.6 billion for the AirForce and $21.2 billion for the Army. $1.7 billion is budgeted for work on the big Trident nuclear submarines, whose eventual cost will exceed $1 billion per submarine. And $657 million is budgeted for work on the giant nuclear carrier CVN-70, which Navy boss Admiral R. Zumwalt says can "demonstrate by our presence both our capability and our determination to protect our commerce and our sources of strategic materials from any interruption."

Chief on that list of "strategic materials" is oil, and the center of attention in the Pentagor planners' heads is the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean area.

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For centuries, the Mediterranean was a"Western Lake," and the Indian Ocean and Arab Gulf were undor the secure control of Western navies. These strategic waterways were first used by European adventurers to explore and then conquer vast areas of the Third World, and later used by European merchants to transport the vast plunder--slaves and spices, cotton and rubber, tin and oil--appropriated from the area by the West. In order to assure unhampered access to this immense wealth -- which helped finance the industrialization of Western Eu-

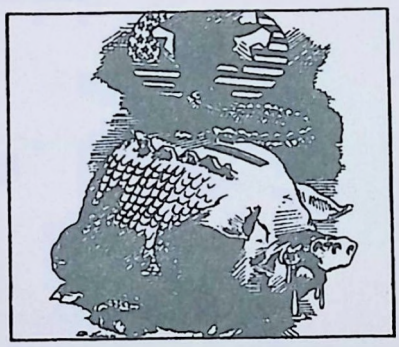
rope -- England and its allies maintained a significant naval presence throughout the are and had troops available at all times for the defense of client monarchies and sheikdoms. British mastery of these waters has also been of great benefit to the United States, as American merchants have long participated in the plunder of the region under the protection of the Royal Navy. It is not surprising therefore that Prime Minister Harold Wilson's announcement that Great Britain would terminate its military presence "East of Suez," and reduce its naval presence in the Mediterranean, caused considerable alarm in the United States--which had always looked to its ally to perform the necessary mission in the region. One American strategist, James D. Atkinson of Georgetown University, observed that, "For almost a century, the vast Red Sea-Persian Gulf-Indian Ocean complex was an area of relative stability. This was so because...British forces were on hand throughout these sea spaces to respond quickly for any needed police action." With Britain no longer willing to perform this police function, the United States immediately began making plans for an increased military presence in this strategic area.

American anxiety over the British withdrawal from the Mediterranean/Indian Ocean area has turned into a near-obsession with the Soviet buildup in the region. The reason is easy to see: the United States and its allies have vital economic, political and strategic interests in the Middle East that would be gravely jeopardized if it were to fall under the domination of a hostile power. Although an accounting of these interests is beyond the scope of this essay, the major ones are identified below.

First and foremost among Western interests in the Middle East is oil. According to the Georgetown University Center for Stategic and International Studies, the Arabian Gulf provides half of Western Europe's oil supply, 90 percent of Japan's, and nearly 100 percent of the oil consumed by U.S.forces in Europe and Asia. All told, oil reserves in the Middle East and North Africa constitute 76 percent of the non-Communist world's global aggregate. Although recent oil discoveries in the North Sea, Nigeria, Alaska and the South China Sea may someday reduce the West's dependence on Middle East supplies--an unlikely possibility as these finds, despite their publicity, are of marginal magnitude--in the foreseeable future the U.S. will require continued access to Arabian Gulf oilfieds and free use of the waterways over which most of the oil is carried. In order to guarantee that Western Europe and Japan will remain in the imperialist camp, the United States must demonstrate its intention to protect "Free World" access to the Gulf and adjacent waters. Furthermore, while the United States does not presently import much oil from the Middle East, American petroleum experts report that domestic use is expanding at a much faster rate than discoveries of reserves in the Western hemisphere, and that by the end of the present decade, it will need considerable imports from the Middle East to forestall an impending"energy crisis." Some experts predict that the U.S.will have to import 20 to 25 percent of its oil supply from the Gulf by 1985. In a discussion of this trend, Admiral Zumwalt told the senate that by 1985, "the quantities of oil imported by sea will be vast--in the order of 12 million barrels a day. That will require from several hundred to over 1,000 tankers...fully committed to deliveries of oil to the United States. The potential for coercion of the U.S., with or without allies, inherent in this situation is ominous...." Indeed, the Georgetown Center warned in 1969 that "the strategic interests of the non-Communist world would be in grave jeopardy if freedom of movement in and out of the Gulf were curtailed or denied," and that "any situation which put a major power hostile to the West astride these oil supplies would be intolerable."

Second, trade with the Asian and African nations bordering the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean is a major factor in the prosperity of Western Europe and Japan, and must be continued if these countries are to remain within thecapitalist system. And until they can "defend" themselves, the U.S. intends to maintain control of these waterways.

Finally, there is the question of the area's strategic significance in the overall balance of power equation. By building up its naval forces in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean, and by developing close ties with nationalist Arab states, the Soviet Union has succeeded in "leapfrogging" the solid line of anti-communist garrison states erected by the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations to contain Communist expansion in Europe and Asia, and thus threaten the continued viability of the NATO alliance.



A new "scare" campaign has been mounted by U.S. Cold War lobbyists and their friends in the Congress and the mass media to build up the Navy and eliminate the "naval gap". The following prophesy, made by Frank R. Barnett of the National Strategy Information Center, is characteristic of such tactics:

> Every student of geopolitics knows that the Middle East is the hinge of three continents; economists realize the same area contains nearly 65 percent of the world's current reserves of oil; and virtually all informed laymen see that Israel is now closely beleaguered by authoritarian Arab governments.... But it is not only Israel's fate that is darkly shadowed by the spread of Russian communism into "warm water"; the viability of NATO the future of Africa, and the security of the United States are likewise menaced by Soviet ambitions and expanding capabilities in this strategic region. If the voices of the New Left, the Black Panthers and their odd bedfellows prevail, both Vietnam and the Middle East will be abandones. In which case,

the eastern Mediterranean and Indian Oceans become Soviet bathtubs and the new nations of Africa and Asia prey for the hunting parties of Communist political commandos.
(from W.Joshua, Soviet Penetration into the Middle East, New York, 1971)

Although the Pentagon has been very vociferous in its warnings of increased Soviet naval activity in the Mediterranean/Indian Ocean area, it has been largely silent when discussing the build-up of its own forces in the region. The anti-Soviet scare campaign has been used, in fact, to camouflage the expansion of its military apparatus into the Indian Ocean. Many of these moves have gone entirely unreported, while the significance of others has been intentionally disguised. Thus the signing of agreements with Spain, Portugal and Bahrain to maintain bases on their territory has been described as administrative measures in order to prevent their submission to the Senate as treaties--which would have required full-dress debates. Despite such obfuscation, it is possible to begin charting the magnitude of the U.S. buildup in the Mediterranean/Indian Ocean. A brief summary of major developments is presented below.

Indian Ocean: After the fighting between India and Pakistan which led to the creation of Bangladesh, the U.S. announced that it would begin regular naval patrols in the Indian Ocean to "show the flag" and demonstrate its intention to protect vital interests in the area. (Missile-armed nuclear submarines had already been active in the region for a long time.) In order to facilitate the anticipated increase in naval activity, the Pentagon expanded its communications facilities at North West Cape, Australia, and began construction of an entirely new base on Diego Garcia atoll in the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Diego Garcia installation, the U.S.'s first in the Indian Ocean proper, will house a communications station, an airstrip, and naval docking facilities. Other moves in the area include the opening of negotiations with Singapore for the use of abandoned British naval bases there, and the initiation of contacts with South Africa for the exchange of intelligence data on Soviet maritime activity in the Indian Ocean. The United States also furnished helicopters and other arms aid to Ceylon when that country was rocked by a revolutionary upheaval in 1971, and permitted some arms to be shipped to West Pakistan in 1971 despite an official ban on such exports.

Arabian Gulf: The United States has long based a small naval squadron, the U.S. Middle East Force (MEF), at Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf. Until 1971, it obtained the right to use the Bahrain facility from Great Britain, which has ruled the island sheikdom as a protectorate since 1898; when Bahrain became independent on August 15, 1971, it became necessary to negotiate a new agreement for occupation of the base, and this was accomplished on December 23rd of that year. When the Bahrain agreement was signed, the State Department classified it as an executive order and it was thus not submitted to the Senate as a treaty. Several members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, led by Clifford Case of New Jersey, subsequently charged that the Administration had violated the Constitutional provisions calling for Senate approval of all treaties, and successfully held up approval of funds for the Bahrain facility. Despite this harassment, the Pentagon is going ahead with plans to upgrade the Middle East Force: at least one of its two aging destroyers will be replaced by a new vessel--perhaps a missile-armed Spruance-class destroyer--while the MEF's flagship will be replaced by a modern amphibious transport ship, the 14,000 ton LaSalle. The United States has also shipped substantial quantities of modern weapons, including patrol boats and other vessels, to the Shah of Iran, who has seized several islands in the Gulf and increased his navy's activity in the area.

Mediterranean: United States moves in the Mediterranean have been described as administrative measures or minor readjustments of existing infrastructure, but the fact is that the U.S. has embarked on a substantial expansion of its facilities in the region. On August 6, 1970, the U.S. concluded a new agreement with Spain authorizing the retention of basing rights there. As in the case of the Bahrain agreement, this was not submitted to the Senate as a treaty, despite the fact that the 1970 agreement constituted a significant alteration of the prior understanding with the Spanish government. Similar deception was used to disguise the nature of agreements with Portugal for use of bases in territories under its control. The U.S. has also expanded its naval facilities at Sigonella in Sicily, and increased its payments to NATO in order to insure continued Western access to the British bases on Malta. Meanwhile, new naval bases have been acquired in Sardinia and at Piraeus in Greece. The Sardinia base (located at Maddalena Island, on Sardinia's northern coast) will be used to service the U.S. submarine fleet in the Mediterranean, while Piraeus (the port of Athens) will become the home port of a major Sixth Fleet task force consisting of at least six destroyers and an aircraft carrier (ultimately 6,600 servicemen and 3,000 dependents will be homeported in Greece). The terms of agreement with Rome for the use of the Sardinia base have not yet been announced, partly due to strong political opposition to U.S. presence there. The Athens agreement is still being negotiated, although the Navy is acting as if it had already been signed and approval for it given by the Senate here. These new basing arrangements are designed to improve the fighting capability of the Sixth Fleet by increasing the time spent by warships "on station" in the Mediterranean (previously, Sixth Fleet vessels had to return to Norfolk Virginia for servicing and repairs) and by improving morale (sailors will no longer be separated from spouses for six months at a time). Other moves in the Mediterranean have included increased shipments of modern aircraft and boats to principal clients in the area--Greece, Turkey, Israel and Jordan-- and the replacement of obsolete Sixth Fleet ships with modern new ones. As new amphibious assault ships, missile-armed hydrofoil patrol boats, and other new types of warships become available, they will be rushed to the Mediterranean to upgrade the capability of the fleet and the Marine amphibious force assigned to the region.

Michael Klare, NACLA, November 1972.

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